REASONABLE RELIGION
I Peter 3:8-16
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In perparation for this sermon I called a distinguished educator I know and asked her to tell me, in two minutes, what a mature person knows that a twelve year old doesn't. She did a good job of answering. She said that at the age of eleven or twelve, youngsters are most concerned with how the world relates to them, impinges on them, effects them. Later, as young adults, they will develop a sense of responsibility, and a concern for their relationship with the world. It's natural and healthy and good at twelve, she said, to think in terms first, of my immediate needs and what the world owes me. Mature people will come to see things in terms of the needs of others and that they owe something back to the world.

"How about a specific discipline?" I asked. "Fine," she said. "Let's talk about music." At twelve, most youngsters are working hard trying to learn how to read music, develop technique, master an instrument. Most really don't understand what it means to be a musician in an orchestra which is playing Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. "Or math," she said. Youngsters struggle with the components and don't get to the exciting part when you can see the whole picture till much later. I told her many of us never did get to that part. The world is full of people who seriously considered suicide somewhere in the middle of High School trigonometry precisely because they couldn't see the whole picture. Or art or geography of politics. Twelve year olds are dealing with pieces mostly and it is hard to generate enthusiasm or interest in the big picture when all you have is a series of little pieces. Fortunately, most people grow intellectually, develop more skills, the education establishment keeps providing the component parts, and one day the pieces come together and what was very blurry comes into focus. The vague shape of the Fifth Symphony becomes sharp and incredibly beautiful when the second violist hears it, hears himself as part of it. What a moment that is! How fortunate it is that we do continue to develop and mature and that we don't perform our mathematic calculations or listen to music or do our grocery shopping on the basis of our understanding of the world at the age of twelve.

Studies have shown, and my experience confirms them, that for many people religious growth, theological development stops at about the age of twelve. The pattern is common enough not to warrant much explanation. Typically a youngster is brought to church for a dozen years, through the process on confirmation or its equivalent. At the onset of adolescence a lot of things adults want youngsters to do look oppresive, irrelevant, pointless, uninteresting and the youngster launches a protest. It's part of staking out an identity and it's an important part of the developmental process. Now, Church School is not as essential as eating and sleeping nor does it have the coercive force of the law going for it which attending school does, and so it becomes an easy sacrifice to the hormonal erruption occurring in the adolescent. People simply stop attending. But they don't stop thinking about religious questions. My experience is that from adolescence through college years questions of profound theological import are constantly near the surface. But a devastating pattern has been established. The religious skills have stopped at age twelve, but the questions keep getting tougher. An analogous situation would be to stop mathemetic skill development at twelve; never attend a class, work a problem, hear a lecture and then try, at 20, to solve a complex equation. The dynamic happens theologically, religiously every day. The results are disastrous. An adolescent religion is simply not adequate.

Some drop out. Some come to the curious conclusion that what they learned and experienced at age twelve is all there is. Some, of course, resume a pattern of theological and spiritual growth by engaging in classes, seminars, personal reading. Some continue to grow magnificently, all their lives. Others, however, stay with the church, getting by theologically, but not in a way that is challenging, exciting

or even very interesting. Like Alice in Wonderland, when the Queen claims to be one hundred and four and Alice can't believe it, they shut their eyes tightly, draw a deep breath, swallow hard and try to believe again whatever it is that the church seems intent on their believing.

"Be ready at all times to answer anyone who asks you to explain the hope in you." The text this morning is that bit of advice in a letter written to Christians in the First Century. The first and most critical task facing the earliest church was to know what it believed clearly enough to be able to communicate it to a world that had never heard of it before. The first job facing the original Christians was to take a story about a Jewish Rabbi and retell it in a way that would persuade Greek speaking citizens of Rome that it was true. It is one of the most awesome intellectual accomplishments in all of history. You may have found St. Paul to be difficult reading, unnecessarily combative or just plain grouchy. His assignment, however, was extremely difficult. He set about convincing people who were at best neutral but more than likely hostile that Jesus of Nazareth was God's son. The first requirement of the first Christians was to be reasonable enough about the faith that others would at least understand.

That requirement hasn't changed much. If the world of the first century was hostile to Christianity ours is skeptical. If theirs was uninterested, ours is preoccupied. Christendom is gone. The world no longer automatically makes Christian assumptions or even Christian gestures. In fact, there is a broad assumption that agnosticism is the only reasonable position, and a distinct suspicion that the truly brave and strong will affirm atheism. There is, in my estimation, a desperate need for people who know what they believe and can "explain the hope that is in them."

That juxtaposition of religion and atheism is a false one, by the way. Atheism is not coldly rational. In fact, it's a religion. You can't prove that God exists, nor can you prove that there is no God. Either way, it's an act of faith; a pilgrimage which begins with reason and ends up with a leap into darkness.

What Christianity has always said is that the human mind, the intellect, is a legitimate avenue into the inner person. Jesus himself told stories and taught in a manner that required the mind of the other to understand, evaluate and come to a conclusion. "You shall love the Lord your God with heart, soul and mind" is the Great Commandment. The mind - the thinking, evaluating, imagining, human intellect is part of our basic religious equipment. You don't have to park your brain outside the door of the church. Our earliest and best tradition invites you to love God with your mind. What Christianity has suggested is that the mind is not the only religious equipment you have. You also have heart, spirit, emotions. Christianity has held that truth is not exclusively established by the intellect. There are limitations as to what your own thought processes can do for you. We've always known that when it came to beauty, ecstacy, love. We've always known that the precise biological analysis does not adequately describe a rose. Nor do the chemical descriptions of hormonal stimulations come close to defining what a man and woman in love feel for one another. The mind isn't all there is to us, thank goodness. But neither does our appreciation for revelation rule out the use of reason in religion. Presbyterians have held out for a religion balanced between intellect and emotion; mind and heart. The philosopher Pascal wrote long ago: "There are two equally dangerous extremes, to shut reason out and to let nothing else in."

Our particular tradition values and celebrates the human intellect, without worshiping it. The founder of Presbyterianism, John Calvin, was a lawyer and a scholar. And among the revolutionary ideas he conceived and put to work in 16th

century Geneva was public education. The Reformers broke with a thousand years of tradition by insisting that lay people could and should understand what they believe. Luther translated the scriptures into German so that people could read for themselves. He revolutionized the concept of what it means to be a Christian by insisting that the human mind has a part in the process. Presbyterians insisted on an educated clergy from the beginning, and in order to nurture human understanding and intellectual growth founded colleges and universities all over the North American continent. At our best we have not only refused to shelter the faith from the vigorous critical examination of the scholar, we have welcomed it.

We have been willing, and still are willing, to bet on the persuasive power of the Gospel in the face of any opposition. We are still willing to trust that God will make his truth known, and reveal himself when minds are stretched and intellects are challenged. The late Loren Eisely, an anthropologist, argued powerfully, that scientific research can and often does lead to something like religious revelation. "The wonderful experience of mystery arose," he wrote, "not by primitive campfires alone. Skins may still prickle in a modern classroom."
(The Star Thrower, "Science and the Sense of the Holy" - p. 189)

I continue to believe that the Christian faith can stand alone in the market place of ideas. I do not believe that religion which is worth anything requires protection from rigorous examination. I don't believe there is anything science can discover about the world, the universe, the cosmos which will threaten the truth God has shown in Jesus Christ.

In fact, I would argue the reasonability of what we believe. Leslie Weatherhead once wrote: "...it seems a strange mentality by which a person can look up into a starlit sky or even down into a humble flower...or meditate on some deed of self-sacrifice, or on the mystery of human love, and say...'there cannot possibly be a God.'" (The Christian Agnostic, p. 15)

But more than the sense of the Holy which results from appreciation of nature, I would argue that the Christian understanding of the human condition is the best and most useful and most accurate. I would argue that the Christian perception of human relations, of grace, forgiveness, acceptance and selflessness is the most profound approach to the subject.

I would argue that Jesus was demonstrably accurate about human experience and human nature when he said wildly improbable things like:

...If you want to preserve your life, you must give it away.
...It is more blessed to give than to receive.
...If your enemy strikes you on the cheek, turn the other also.

Is there any serious doubt about the pragmatic importance of typically Christian ideas about compassion, peace hunger, justice? Is there any serious doubt that unless something like the Sermon on the Mount begins to be taken seriously - economically, politically, there will be no future.

The late John Baillie was a Scotsman who thought brilliantly and understandably about the faith and the life of the mind. I have always remembered and been intrigued by an essay I read a long time ago. In it Professor Baillie was discussing the tension between his natural instincts as a human being and the ethical imperatives of the Gospel. It would seem, at first, that objectivity would be in the direction of following one's instincts and not superimposing anything on our humanness. But then, a deeper understanding emerges, he argued. There is something fundamentally and profoundly true about this business. It doesn't, ultimately, conflict with my

ability to reason as I expected it would. In the final analysis, my own reason confirms it. He wrote - "I am under obligation to love my neighbor as myself...contrary to natural inclination...But in my heart of hearts I know that it is true. In spite of myself, I am more certain of this than of anything science or philosophy could tell me." (A Reasoned Faith, Pascal and St. Paul, p. 117)

Part of the challenge, the excitement in being a Christian today is frankly, intellectual. It is to stay alert...to continue to grow...to deal with a brave new world which often simply writes religion out of the script. God calls us to love him with heart, soul and mind. The call of Jesus Christ to faithful discipleship in the world includes our minds, our mental ability, our intellect. The challenge is at least twenty centuries old. "Be ready at all times to answer anyone who asks you to explain the hope you have in you." In fact, the argument is easily made that our culture, our community, our nation, our world needs people who can do that more desperately than ever before.

AMEN.

God eternal, along with hearts to love you and voices to sing your praise, you have given us minds to know you. Give us the courage and the strength and the faith to use our minds in your service, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

AMEN.

Malcolm Peers -
Purpose of an Education is to
Serve the Name God
use N Love + Speculus